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SPEECH

OF THE

HON. LEWIS CASS, OF MICHIGAN,
1782 - 1866

ON THE

DEFENCES OF THE COUNTRY;

DELIVERED

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1845.

WASHINGTON:

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NATIONAL DEFENCES.

Mr. CASS then called for the reading of the following resolutions, presented by him on the 9th instant:

Resolved, That the Committee on Naval Affairs be instructed to inquire into the condition of the navy of the United States, and into the quantity and condition of the naval supplies now on hand; and whether an increase of them is not necessary to the efficient operations of the navy, and to its preservation and augmentation; and, generally, into its capacity for defending our coast and our commerce, and for any service the exigencies of the country may probably require.

Resolved, That the Committee on Military Affairs be instructed to inquire into the condition of the national fortifications and their armaments, and whether other defensive works are necessary; and into the condition and quantity of the military supplies; and into the state of the means possessed by the government for the defence of the country.

Resolved, That the Committee on the Militia be instructed to inquire into the present condition of that great branch of the public service, and into the state of the militia laws; and that they be further instructed to report such changes in the existing system as will give more experience and efficiency to that arm of defence, and will place it in the best condition for protecting the country, should it be exposed to foreign invasion.

Mr. CASS, in support of the resolutions, then rose and said:

Mr. PRESIDENT: It is impossible to peruse the President's message, and to observe the progress of public opinion in England, as this is indicated in the declarations of her statesmen in Parliament and in her daily journals, without being aware, that a crisis is fast approaching in the intercourse between that country and ours, which demands the serious consideration, and may require the cordial and active co-operation of the whole American people. The President has told us that the negotiations respecting Oregon, if they have not reached a close, have, at any rate, reached a position almost equivalent to it. The claims of the respective nations are utterly irreconcilable; and a compromise, by a voluntary sacrifice of a portion of their pretensions by one party, or by both, or a submission of the whole matter in controversy to some foreign power, seems the only alternatives by which peace can be preserved.

Our government has already declined to submit our rights to foreign arbitration. That is a process which, under equal circumstances, may well be adopted by independent nations to terminated disputes, which would otherwise seek the arbitrament of war. It preserves the honor of both parties, and ought to preserve the just interests of both. It substitutes reason for force, and is therefore suited to the advancing opinions of the age, and to the duties and feelings of Christian communities. But these equal circumstances do not exist in our present dispute with England. There are obvious considerations, into which I need not enter here, growing out

of the relative situation of that country and of ours, with those powers of Europe from whom an arbitrator would almost necessarily be selected, and out of the influence she possesses over their counsels, and, I may add, growing out of the nature of our institutions, and the little favor these enjoy at present upon the eastern continent, which may well have made the government hesitate to submit important interests, at this particular juncture, to such a tribunal. It may well have thought it better to hold on to our right, and to hold on also to our remedy, rather than commit both to a royal arbitrator. War is a great calamity, and ought to be avoided by all proper means; but there are calamities greater than war, and among these is national dishonor.

I did not rise, sir, as will be seen, to discuss in whole or in part the question of our right to Oregon. That subject will come up in its own time. There may be some difference of opinion, as well in Congress as in the nation, respecting the territorial extent of that right; though I take this opportunity of expressing my entire and hearty concurrence in the claim as advanced by the President. But I am sure there is no great party, and I trust there are few individuals in this country, who are prepared, even in an extreme spirit of compromise, to accept the most liberal offer that England has yet made. Her pretensions, and ours are so widely separated, that there seems no middle ground on which to meet. Our most moderate claim, and her most liberal offer, leaves the parties asunder by seven degrees of latitude, and by a large portion of the territory in question. What, then, is our condition? Can we recede? Can we stand still? or must we advance?

As to receding, it is neither to be discussed nor thought of. I refer to it, but to denounce it—a denunciation which will find a response in every American bosom. Nothing is ever gained by national pusillanimity. And the country which seeks to purchase temporary security by yielding to unjust pretensions, buys present ease at the expense of permanent honor and safety. It sows the wind to reap the whirlwind. I have said elsewhere what I will repeat here, that it is better to fight for the first inch of national territory than for the last. It is better to defend the door sill, than the hearth stone—the porch, than the altar. National character is a richer treasure than gold or silver, and exercises a moral influence, in the hour of danger, which, if not power itself, is its sure ally. Thus far, ours is untarnished, and let us all join, however separated by party or by space, so to preserve it.

If we cannot recede, can we stand still? No, Mr. President; in this, as in all the other elements of national power and greatness, our duty and our

destiny are onwards. We might as well attempt to stay the waves of the Pacific, as to stay the tide of emigration, which is setting towards its shores. If this government had the disposition, it has not the power to arrest this human current. But it has neither—neither the power nor the disposition to do it. There are questions of public right, which may rest in abeyance; which are not called into daily exercise; and need be asserted, only when required. But such is not the right by which we hold Oregon. We must maintain it, or abandon it. A vigorous and enterprising people are fast increasing there, who will possess the country by the best of all titles—that of occupation and improvement; and if we do not provide them a government, they will provide one for themselves. Already necessity has compelled them to organize their civil society, and to make those arrangements for the preservation of order, without which no civilized community can exist. It is only a few days since they made known to you, by a judicious and well-written memorial, their condition and their wants; and asked your interposition to remove the serious difficulties with which they find themselves environed. And think you, that if their prayer is unheard, and their grievances unredressed; and if the present state of things continue, that you will find a distant colony patiently awaiting your tardy movements, and ready to admit your jurisdiction, when you may be ready to exercise it? No; they will feel themselves neglected, cast off, left to their own resources, the victims of diplomatic chicanery or of national pusillanimity, and they will seek their own security in their own power. That great truth, not applicable alone to republican governments, but common to all, and which lay at the foundation of our own revolution, that protection and allegiance are reciprocal, will soon be heard upon the banks of the Columbia, and will inspire the councils of the hardy pioneers who, while they have sought a new home in a distant country, have carried with them the sentiments of true liberty to the regions beyond the Rocky mountains.

It is clearly impossible that the present state of things should continue, nor, I must confess, do I see how it is possible that a community, inhabiting the same region, and possessing the same right in every part of it, can hold a divided allegiance, and be governed at the same time by two distinct and distant sovereignties. When the present anomalous provision was made, the country was unsettled; for the few hunters who roamed over it could hardly be dignified with the name of settlers; and it probably never occurred to the negotiators, nor to their governments, that this arrangement would outlive the then existing state of things, and would come to operate upon a civilized, a stationary, and a rapidly-increasing community.

But what kind of order can a double-headed government preserve? How are its departments, legislative, executive, and judicial, to be administered? How are rights to be enforced, or wrongs to be prevented or punished? Two neighbors, living within hearing of each other, are responsible to different tribunals, and governed by different codes of laws. An American killing an Englishman must be tried by an American court and by American laws. But how are English witnesses to be summoned, or English disturbers of the proceedings of the court to be removed or punished? Possessory rights are to be judged by the courts of the party last getting possession. Contracts are to be enforced

by the courts of the party charged with violating them. And wrongs are to be redressed, or satisfied, or punished by the courts of the party accused of committing them. A single American in the midst of an English settlement, or a single Englishman in the midst of an American settlement, bears with him a charmed life. He may do what he will, and as he will; but he is beyond the reach of restraint, and almost of punishment. He is invulnerable; and the arrows of justice cannot pierce even his heel. The nearest magistrate who has jurisdiction over him, may be hundreds of miles removed; and were he nearer, his national sympathies might naturally be excited in favor of his countrymen. There can be no regular grants of land—none, in fact, of those public improvements essential to the progress and stability of society. I present merely the most general views of this subject; but they are sufficient to show how impracticable it would be to attempt to establish this double jurisdiction. It would be easy to pursue the investigation much further were it necessary.

Who does not see that bitter disputes would soon arise? That each party would accuse the other of partiality and injustice? That violence and bloodshed would follow, and that an intestine war would establish the ascendancy of one or other of these rival and national parties? All this is so plain that he who runs may read. And we are warned by the surest instincts of our nature not to trust our rights and our cause, and the cause of humanity, to such a partition of authority.

If, then, Mr. President, we can neither retrace our steps, nor check them, we must go onward. And England has placed herself in the path that is before us; and if she retain her position, we must meet her. If the last proposition she has submitted is her ultimatum, it is effectively a declaration of war. Its advent may be delayed a few months; but as soon as the notice expires, if she persists, as she will do, in her occupation of the country, the struggle must commence. It is not the notice which is a beligerent measure—for that is a treaty-right—but it is the subsequent and immediate course the parties will probably pursue that must lead to war. I hope—and I ought rather to say I wish—that England would awaken to a sense of her injustice, and would yield where she could yield honorably, and ought to yield rightfully. But will she do so? It is safest to believe she will not, and this dictate of prudence is fortified by every page of her history. When did she voluntarily surrender a territory she had once acquired, or abandon a pretension she had once advanced? If a few such cases could be found in the record of her progress and acquisitions, they would be but exceptions, which would render the general principle of her conduct only the more obvious. For my own part, I see no symptoms of relaxation in the claim she has put forth. And the declarations in Parliament of the leaders of the two great parties that divide her government and her people—Sir Robert Peel and Lord John Russell—show a union of opinion, and foreshow a union of action, should action be necessary, rarely to be found in the political questions that agitate her councils, and are the index, if not the assurance, of an equal unanimity in public sentiment.

In the London Morning Chronicle of April 5th, is the report of the proceedings in Parliament of the preceding day, on the receipt of the President's inaugural address. I hold the paper in my hand; and, as the discussion was a pregnant one, and ought to

be a warning one, I shall take the liberty of reading a portion of it.

Here Mr. C. read extracts from the paper containing the remarks of Lord John Russell on what he considered the spirit of aggrandizement displayed by the government and people of the United States, in their course respecting the annexation of Texas.

Mr. C. then continued: Here, sir, we find the leader of the great whig party, in his place in Parliament, in effect denouncing the course of the United States in the annexation of Texas, because it tends towards territorial aggrandizement; and the eternal cant about British moderation and philanthropy, and American injustice and ambition, is heard, and read, and believed in every corner of the British dominions. I must confess, sir, I am heartily tired of it. Were the subject and its consequences not so important, these declarations would excite ridicule, as they now excite regret and surprise. They are not confined to ordinary political discussions and to the journals of the day, but they come from the highest men, in the highest places. And here is an eminent English statesman asking the administration what course they intend to pursue in the altered policy of the United States, as he terms it—as though the voluntary union of two independent people upon this continent were an injury to England, which demanded her immediate attention, and might demand her armed interposition. And he tells us, he understands that communications have been sent to the United States, to Mexico, and to Texas, on the subject of what he calls the new policy of the United States. And we know that those communications to Mexico and to Texas contained large offers to prevent annexation. But thanks to the onward course of our government, and to the feelings and determination of the Texan people, this interposition was fruitless; as was the communication to Mexico, if this were designed to embroil us with that country. The well-timed rebuke, administered by the President in his message, to the French government for its interposition in our affairs with Texas, mighty with equal justice, have been administered to England; and I presume would have been so, had not the President looked upon the course of the one power as natural, judging from past events, while the course of the other was unnatural, impolitic, and unexpected.

But this whig lecture of Lord John Russell, upon the ambition of the United States, and these perpetual eulogiums upon the moderation of England, are in strange contrast with the practical principles and the progress of her empire. The moderation of England, and the ambition of the United States! Why, sir, the world has never seen, since the fall of the Roman empire, such a colossal power as England has built up. She has girded the earth with her fortifications, and covered the ocean with her fleets. A comparatively narrow island, off the western coast of Europe, she numbers as her subjects 153,000,000 of people—being more than one-sixth part of the human race; and has reduced to her subjection 3,800,000 square miles inhabited by them, being one-eighth part of the habitable globe. And in the long series of her acquisitions from the reduction of Ireland downwards, with the exception of her union with Scotland and some recent discoveries in the South Sea, I believe all have been gained by the sword. And when has it happened in her history, that a people, or the smallest fragment of a people,

has voluntarily sought peace or protection under her sovereignty? Her armies and fleets have too often been sent out wherever there was a people to be subdued, or the fruits of their industry to be secured. I have no pleasure in dwelling upon this course of ambition. I have no pleasure in national crimination and recrimination. I had far rather dwell upon all she has done, and she has done much, to command the gratitude of mankind, and much for the progress of civilization, of improvement, and of knowledge. But we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that this country and its institutions enjoy little favor in England. That there is a systematic attack upon our character, and upon what we are, and have been, and upon our future, so far as it is given to foresee and to fear it. I confess, all this has produced a lasting impression upon me; and I feel little disposed, in any controversy with that country, to submit to unjust demands, urged in a spirit of unfriendliness, if not of menace.

And if England is moderate, we are ambitious! Why, sir, we have made but three acquisitions of territory since we have been a nation. And these were not distant colonies, but coterminous regions. And all three have been made peaceably, bloodlessly. Two were colonies belonging to European monarchies, where the assent of the people to the transfer of their allegiance could not be asked. But they have since shown their satisfaction by their patriotism, and their prosperity has been the reward of it. Nowhere is the Union more prized, nor would it anywhere be more zealously defended. The third and last, and most glorious of these acquisitions, is now in the progress of completion, by the voluntary action of a neighboring people, who knew the value of our institutions, and sought to participate in them, and who asked admission to our confederacy. And we shall receive them with open arms. And it is an encouraging spectacle to the lovers of freedom through the world, and the best tribute that could be offered to its value.

I said, Mr. President, that this was the latest, but I hope it will not be the last of our acquisitions. While I would sacredly respect the just rights of other nations, I would cheerfully extend the jurisdiction of our own, whenever circumstances may require it, and wherever it can be done without injustice. I have no fear that an extension of territory will weaken our government, or put in peril our institutions. We have an adhesive and a life-preserving principle, in the exercise of political power by the great body of the people, which is a surer bond of union and preservation than fleets, and armies, and central powers. If this administration could crown its labor of acquisition—and in what it has done, it has labored with not less ability than success—by the peaceful annexation of California, it would secure imperishable honor for itself, and would command the lasting gratitude of the whole country.

But I will again advert to the *Morning Chronicle*, to show the spirit of the discussion in the British Parliament, and the views taken by the British statesmen of their own claims to Oregon and of ours.

Lord John Russell said: "The President of the United States has made, as I have already read to the House a peremptory claim to the whole of this territory. He has claimed the whole possession of it for the United States, and has, in an unusual manner, called upon the people of the United States, with their wives and children, to oc-

copy that territory. That district is becoming, on account of the forts on the Columbia river, more important every year. After that statement of the President of the United States, I consider it impossible that her Majesty's government should not endeavor to obtain a speedy solution of this question. I am sure they will feel it impossible to allow the present undefined and unsettled state of relations between the two countries to continue without danger; that the people of the United States, acting upon the suggestions of the President, may endeavor to disturb British subjects in rights which they hold in virtue of existing treaties, and may produce a state of things dangerous to the peace of the two countries. For my own part, I will say in all moderation, that I am not prepared to say that this country ought to put forward any arrogant pretensions. I do not pretend to define—what it properly belongs to her Majesty's advisers to define—the diplomatic proposals that should be made. I will not pretend to say what line ought to be laid down; but this I will say, that I do not think we can make any proposal which will be less than the proposal made by Mr. Canning, (that was the line on the parallel of 49° to the Columbia near its mouth,) with any regard for our own interest or our own honor. [Cheers.] I may be told that it does not matter if this rocky and barren territory should be claimed, or occupied, or taken by the United States. Yes, sir, I must say it does matter. [Cheers.] It cannot be a matter of indifference that a large territory, to which we have a better and a juster title, should be yielded to what I must call a blustering announcement on the part of the President of the United States. It cannot be matter of indifference that the communication between that country west of the Rocky mountains and China, the East Indies, and the whole of South America, should be surrendered at once to a foreign power; but, above all, it cannot be a matter of indifference that the tone of the character of England should be lowered in any transaction we may have to carry on with the United States."

Sir Robert Peel said: "As this subject has been brought under discussion, I trust not improperly by the noble Lord, I feel it my imperative duty on the part of the British government, to state in language the most temperate, but, at the same time, the most decided, that we consider we have rights respecting the territory of Oregon, which are clear and irresistible. We trust still to arrive at an amicable adjustment of our claim; but having exhausted every effort for the settlement, if our rights shall be invaded, we are resolved and we are prepared to maintain them." [Loud and continued cheers from both sides of the House.]

Lord Clarendon said in the House of Lords:

"No assertion was, I believe, ever made with more truth than that our case is free from all doubt."

Lord Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary of State, said: "Should it be otherwise, I can only say that we possess rights, which in our opinion are clear and unquestionable; and by the blessing of God, and with your support, those rights we are fully prepared to maintain." [Loud cheers from all sides.]

Under these imposing circumstances, we may well ask of the watchman, what of the night? We may well inquire, what we ought to do? I take it for granted we shall give the notice recommended by the President; for if we do not, we shall leave the people of Oregon without a government, or with

an impracticable one; and, in either event, the country is lost to us, and the notice being given, in twelve months, without an abandonment of a large portion of her claim, we shall find ourselves involved in a war with England. And it will be no common war, Mr. President; it will be a war not merely of interest, but of strong and stormy passions, growing out of the relative situation of the two nations, and out of the very points of resemblance, which will but render the separation of the parties the wider, and the struggle the longer and the bitterer. It will do no good to shut our eyes to the prospect before us. Danger can neither be averted nor avoided by indifference, nor by presumption. Let us look our difficulties and our duties fully in the face. Let us make preparation adequate to the conjuncture. Let us exhibit to England and to Europe the spectacle of an undivided people, anxious for peace, but ready for war. In the language of Mr. Madison, "let us put the United States into an armor, and an attitude demanded by the crisis, and corresponding with the national spirit and expectation."

One war has already found us unprepared. And what that condition of things cost in blood and treasure, and disaster, those of us who went through the struggle can well remember; and those who have come upon the stage of action since that period, may learn from the history of the times. And perhaps to a certain extent this must be so, and always will be so. We are all opposed to great military establishments in time of peace. They are as dangerous as they are expensive. And they will therefore never be engrafted into the permanent institutions of the country. But when war threatens, we should commence our preparations, and press them with an energy and a promptitude commensurate with the danger.

The President has discharged his duty ably, patriotically, fearlessly. Let us now discharge ours—not by words merely, but by deeds. The best support we can give him is to respond to his declarations by our actions. It is my firm conviction, and I do not hesitate thus publicly to avow it, that the best, if not the only hope that we have of avoiding a war with England is by exhibiting a public and united determination to prosecute it, should it come, with all the energies that God has given us, and by an instant and serious consideration of the preparations necessary for such offensive and defensive measures as may be required, and as prompt an adoption of them as a just regard to circumstances may demand. Our country is extensive. In many portions of it the population is sparse. The frontier, both Atlantic and inland, is long and exposed.

Our defensive works are unfinished, and some of them are unfurnished. I do not know, but I fear that many important branches of supply are inadequate. Our navy, and especially the steam portion of it, is not upon a scale commensurate with our wants, if war is almost upon us. That navy fought itself into favor, and its country into honor, in the seemingly unequal and almost desperate struggle into which it so gallantly went in the last war. And another contest would find it equally true to its duty, and to the public expectations. I trust the time will never again come, when it will be a question in a great crisis, whether the navy shall be dismantled and rot in our docks, or whether it shall be sent out to gather another harvest of glory upon the ocean. It is the

materiel for military and naval operations, it is first necessary to procure. Men we have ready; and such is the patriotism inherent in the American character, that they never will be found wanting in the hour of difficulty and of danger. Our militia requires a new and an efficient organization. It is a reproach to us that we have suffered this important branch of national defence to become so inefficient. It has almost disappeared from the public view. Both the laws upon this subject and the administration of them require immediate and severe examination. For this is one of the great bulwarks of the country in the hour of danger. It has shown its patriotism and valor upon many a bloody field, and the future, if it should need its services, will witness its devotion to the country, whenever and wherever, and however it may be tried. Many of the supplies required for the operations of war, demand time and care for their collection and preparation; and we must remember that we have to do with a people whose arsenals and dock-yards are filled to repletion; whose supplies are upon a scale

equal to any probable demand upon them; whose gigantic military and naval establishments, announce their power and maintain it; and the structure of whose government is better fitted than ours for prompt and vigorous and offensive action.

It is in the spirit of these views that I have submitted the resolutions before the Senate, and in which I ask their concurrence.

A great responsibility is upon us. We shall best discharge it by firmness, and by a wise forecast, which, while it steadily surveys the danger, makes adequate provisions to meet it. By thus acting, we shall give a practical approbation of the course of the President, we shall show to our constituents that their interests are safe in our hands; we shall speak neither in a deprecating tone, nor in a tone of defiance, but of firmness, to England; and we shall give to the nations of Europe a proof that republics are as jealous of their rights and honor, and as determined to maintain them, as monarchical governments.

